



10 Successful Harvard Essays

2025

Getting into Harvard College isn't just about perfect grades or test scores—it's about telling your story. In this feature, The Harvard Crimson along with HS2 Academy presents ten standout personal statements from students who made it through one of the most competitive admissions processes in the world.

Each essay offers a glimpse into a real voice, a real story, and what it truly means to stand out.

Presented By:



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10. Emma's Essay

The first bridge I ever built was made of paper and glue.

My 8th grade physics teacher tasked my class with building a bridge out of two pieces of paper. Instead of focusing on the paper, I applied layers and layers of glue, strengthening the paper each time. The following week, the bridge successfully held 22 pounds, setting the highest school record in 12 years.

Two years later, I began building bridges of a different kind.

The car that brought me from the airport drove away, and I stepped through the doorway into the tiny apartment in the small city of Troyan, Bulgaria. The walls were covered with my stick-figure paintings and childhood pictures.

I laid my eyes on the wise woman in front of me and leaned down to pull her into a hug – not so tightly that it would break her, but enough to show my love. Kissing her wrinkly hands to wipe my tears of joy away, my grandmother mumbled a row of Bulgarian words of affection and smiled. I didn't understand, but I smiled back.

Since she lives 1247,092 miles away from me, my grandmother is not always there to give me a hug when I need it most. Nevertheless, her heart of gold transcends physical distance and has taught me more than anyone about kindness, empathy, and compassion for others. Although she can't walk me through the intricacies of Bayesian statistics or neuroscience for my upcoming test, she tries her best to understand my ambitions and goals, and contributes in other ways – whenever I have an important test coming up, she prays, lights up candles, and keeps them lit until I'm done.

I could purchase plane tickets to trek the distance that separated our homes, but two other gaps were harder to traverse: my aging grandmother's health was deteriorating and I didn't speak Bulgarian.

I sought to create bridges to close these gaps.

My grandmother suffers from rheumatoid arthritis, a disease that presses her body from every side, deforming her joints, and arching her back. She is the smallest person I know, but yet for me, the greatest.

I wished that I could show her the world and take all her pain away, but the only thing that I could do for her was building a bridge that would connect her to the knowledge she wouldn't be able to access otherwise. I spent countless hours researching healthy meals to create a detoxifying and anti-inflammatory nutrition plan for her that would be easy to cook. The research paid off – the pain in her joints subsided.

When my grandmother and I "talked," emotions flowed between our souls like stars fly through space. Words would only describe what we feel – but not show. It was like listening to a song, but not paying attention to the lyrics, only to the pain and passion in the singer's voice and the flow of the melody.

In 2017, I decided that I finally wanted to learn Bulgarian. With a flashlight under my blanket, I started learning the Cyrillic alphabet and Audio CD's with Bulgarian day-to-day conversations talked me to sleep. I surprised my grandmother by writing her a letter – written without Google Translate for the first time. Phone calls became much more frequent, and we grew closer together, but I wanted to go one step further. I moved to Bulgaria for a semester the year after in order to see her happy face when we could finally sing the song of our conversations – with the lyrics.

Seeing the influence my bridges had on my grandmother inspired me to build more. After I came back to Germany, I learned that bridges could be built between anyone.

In March 2020, my best friend's mother confided in me that she was overwhelmed with the task of coordinating her children's schoolwork at home during quarantine. It occurred to me that a platform for building bridges from younger students to older ones could take the load off of parents during this time. I quickly found that bridging these two groups of students leads to a higher learning efficiency since younger students often feel more comfortable studying with students that they can identify with. Soon, my startup was connecting a high-quality and often entirely subsidized learning resource to a socioeconomically diverse population of students from all over Germany.

I hope that by building bridges, we learn to better appreciate each other's differences in order to create a more empathetic and connected world – together.

My bridge made of paper and glue eventually collapsed after holding 22 pounds. But my next bridge is always stronger than the one before. Above all, I will continue connecting others, and I am excited to see what bridge I will build next.

Professional Review by VAL MISRA, MR. MBA®

What did the essay do well?

This powerful essay's anecdotes and personal narrative writing, linear structure, and shining themes of 'turning adversity into opportunity' and 'identity and self-reflection' are all winning attributes. Emma begins with a nice hook by clearly articulating the main essay topic – building bridges – and her first success and ingenuity at it. She is motivated to continue building bridges. Emma then moves into a deeply personal anecdote on the story anchor, her grandmother, who suffers from a painful disease, lives afar, and speaks a different dialect. Through her vivid imagery and detailed, creative prose, Emma draws the reader closer to her grandmother by evoking genuine emotions in us. I feel both sympathy and empathy for her grandmother's struggles and genuine happiness when I learn of Emma's second successful bridge connecting them closer. Emma's personal brand is superbly revealed – compassion, kindness, knowledge-seeking, problem-solving, and connecting – all traits highly valued on college campuses. Emma shows the positive reinforcements and emotions of her grandmother serve as her 'epiphany' and catalyst for building more bridges- her startup. Finally, Emma's introspection and personal growth illuminate. She realizes the power of connecting people and knowledge together to build a better, more empathetic world- bridge building is part of her identity.

What could be improved about the essay?

Emma's beautiful storytelling voice and imagery used in her grandmother's anecdote could have been used elsewhere in the essay (her friend's mother) to emphasize the overall symmetry of her creative writing abilities. Emma could have provided examples of future bridges she might build (at college, career, other) instead of leaving it open-ended.

What makes this essay memorable?

This essay is memorable for two reasons. First, Emma's anecdote on the story anchor, her grandmother, is unique and profoundly touches us. Emma shares her authentic voice and vivid details that showcase their deep bond and love for each other; I love grandmother's lighting of candles and praying during Emma's test-taking. That Emma's character is revealed to us in its entirety through 'helping' grandmother is delightful- 'show don't tell'. Second, Emma captures her growth journey and self-reflection from overcoming adversity to impacting the world, both of which are inspirational and virtuous leaving us hopeful. I know this is not the final bridge Emma and other like-minded students will build.

"It's not an 'S'. On my world it means 'hope!' – Kal El, Man of Steel, & Zach Snyder film.

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